

Striking back at bosses: solidarity networks and sexual assault



Members of the Twin Cities IWW take on a creepy boss through solidarity network-type tactics.

Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault

In the IWW, we sometimes have to deal with two different problems: How do we approach situations where we have left our job (but still have a problem with our employer) and how do we deal with harassment and assault in the workplace?

Wobblies in Seattle have taken on the first question. Wanting to build organizing skills and fight back against bosses and landlords in their area, they started the [Seattle Solidarity Network](#) ('SeaSol').

SeaSol is a network of volunteers, open to workers both employed and unemployed, that takes on workplace and housing fights through a strategy of escalation of tactics. For instance, a tenant is denied their security deposit. Attempts to contact the landlord are ignored or delayed. SeaSol will march in with 30 people and hand the landlord a demand letter telling them to give the renter their deposit in a certain amount of time or else. If the landlord doesn't give in, pickets will follow, and so on.

Harassment and assault in the workplace is something that has been less thought about by union organizers or the left in general, even less than the fights SeaSol typically takes on. Some of us in the union have briefly addressed [sexual harassment on shop floor](#), but it's still an ongoing conversation. Seemingly not talked about at all is the issue of assault, sexual or otherwise. During the 1990s (the latest period with statistics I could easily find), there was an average of 35,000 incidents of workplace sexual assault each year.



Striking back at bosses: solidarity networks

and sexual assault

Members of the Twin Cities IWW take on a creepy boss through solidarity network-type tactics.

Trigger Warning: Sexual Assault

In the IWW, we sometimes have to deal with two different problems: How do we approach situations where we have left our job (but still have a problem with our employer) and how do we deal with harassment and assault in the workplace?

Wobblies in Seattle have taken on the first question. Wanting to build organizing skills and fight back against bosses and landlords in their area, they started the Seattle Solidarity Network ('SeaSol').

SeaSol is a network of volunteers, open to workers both employed and unemployed, that takes on workplace and housing fights through a strategy of escalation of tactics. For instance, a tenant is denied their security deposit.

Attempts to contact the landlord are ignored or delayed. SeaSol will march in with 30 people and hand the landlord a demand letter telling them to give the renter their deposit in a certain amount of time or else. If the landlord doesn't give in, pickets will follow, and so on.

Harassment and assault in the workplace is something that has been less thought about by union organizers or the left in general, even less than the fights SeaSol typically takes on.

Some of us in the union have briefly addressed sexual harassment on shopfloor, but it's still an ongoing conversation. Seemingly not talked about at all is the issue of assault, sexual or otherwise. During the 1990s (the latest period with statistics I could easily find), there was an average of 35,000 incidents of workplace sexual assault each year.

What *should be* our response when this happens? What *can* our response be? In the following situation, these two problems intersected, and Wobblies came up with a way to address it.

In October, a fellow worker was working as a bike delivery person at a local restaurant in Minneapolis. It was only his third week on the job and as was apparently the custom with new employees, the manager invited him out for drinks. At the bar, the manager continued to buy the Fellow Worker drinks for a while, until a certain point, the manager placed him in a cab bound for the manager's apartment.

They took a cab back to the manager's apartment, where he turned on music and made some drinks. At some point, the manager brought over and stuck under the nose of the FW a jar of some chemical. At this point the manager sexually assaulted the FW. The FW managed to leave the apartment before it went any further.

Understandably, after this experience, he did not feel comfortable working at this restaurant or with this manager anymore, and so stopped going to work. A couple of days later, after depositing his last check, it bounced, resulting in overdraft fees and charges.

This story, so far, is not unique, sadly. Wage theft and sexual harassment are widespread in the workforce and even sexual assault is not uncommon. All three go chronically unreported and when reported, penalties for the perpetrators often

range from a slap on the wrist to no consequences at all. Direct action on these issues seem even more rare. However, this fellow worker refused to let this slide.

He met up with some of his former co-workers and IWW members from the Twin Cities branch and they decided they was going to march on the manager, demanding the money from the bounced check, reimbursement for the overdraft fees, and two weeks severance pay (including tips). The next day, he and around 15 Wobblies carefully planned a march on the boss, then walked into the restaurant and executed it and delivered a letter with the demands, noting that they needed to be met within 24 hours.

After some back and forth through text messages, in which the manager asked the FW to come pick up the check “without all those people” (this request was refused), the demands were met in less than 24 hours. The FW received a check for around \$400.

This situation, while inspiring because of its end result, brings up very important questions for our union. How do we deal with wage theft, sexual harassment and sexual assault? What does a collective response to an often individualized, “personal” situation look like? This isn’t an isolated case. Much of our class shares these experiences. These are discussions I don’t have the answers to, but this story may reveal some insight into dealing with the various forms of oppression we face in our experience as waged workers.

Originally posted: June 8, 2012 at The Organizer